

Copper Valley Celebrates Their Chamber



By Linda Weld

The Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce held its first meeting in the Banquet Room at the Caribou Restaurant in 1987 when things were difficult and people realized a collaborative activity like the Chamber would be helpful in making the local business community successful.

It is now 27 years later, and the Chamber continues to hold these meetings most months throughout the year, though they are far different from that first October meeting so long ago. For decades, the hallmark of a Copper Valley Chamber meeting has been the noisy hum of people talking as businesses from around the community discuss their lives, their work, and what's happening in the Copper River Valley as they wait for dinner to be served.

Over the years travel and tourism has become a major source of income and opportunity for people living in the Copper

Valley. It has allowed people to develop their personal talents and interests into actual money-making seasonal businesses and jobs.

When the Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce began on that October night, however, people were starting from the beginning. There was no visitor center; which was a problem. The original visitor center -- a small log cabin built by state park personnel and Alaska Conservation Corps high school volunteers -- was donated to the Chamber by the Alaska State Park system and moved from Dry Creek State Park, across from Gulkana Airport, to the Hub parking lot. The work of moving the cabin was done by volunteers, especially Copper Valley Construction. The cabin, which was sod-roofed and chinked with sphagnum moss, was placed at the Hub, and was used for many years.

The Copper Valley is as big as West Virginia, and unlike Valdez, it's not at the end of a road. For centuries the Copper Valley has been a passageway to other parts of Alaska. In spite of Glennallen's modest size, the crossroads at Glennallen, known as the 'Hub', make up an important intersection. Roads emanate out of the Hub and head off in wildly different directions in a way that is not rivaled by any other Alaska community.

The Copper Valley Visitor Center, due to its location at the Hub in the center of a major intersection in the Alaska road system, has one of the most important locations of any visitor center in the state.

In a way, this visitor center is not just a local visitor center,



it's a regional visitor center; serving all the small communities of the Copper River Valley as well as the communities that surround the Valley including: Kennicott-McCarthy, Valdez, Tok, Delta Junction, Glacier View, the Denali Highway and Lake Louise.

As tourism grew along this corridor, it was clear the visitor center outgrew itself. Herman Schliesing, of Service Oil and Gas (now Crowley), allowed the Chamber of Commerce to move into the old Maxi-mart building, where a new system of outreach could be put in place. The new space allowed businesses to promote themselves through the use of large displays, maps, brochures, photographs, and other interesting items that showcased their business to travelers. For 27 years, without fail, the Chamber has opened its doors to the traveling public every summer, first at the cabin and then in the larger building.

This is a remarkable accomplishment, as there is no city government or tax base in the Copper Valley to call upon when help is needed. Instead, funding for the Chamber comes from membership dues, advertising, sales, and fundraising events. In addition, the core of the Chamber's work has been conducted for its entire existence primarily through volunteers who have given hundreds of hours, over the years, to keeping the visitor center open.

This year, after decades of successfully operating the Chamber Visitor Center without interruption the facility at the Hub has been completely upgraded. The entire inside of the visitor center has been remodeled, rewired, and repainted. It has also been made more energy-efficient by having the doors replaced and the heating upgraded. The entrance area has been remodeled and the porch outside has been completely rebuilt, along with wider entry stairs, safer railings, and a custom-made handicap ramp.

The system of presenting displays to the public has also been upgraded. Today, businesses are displaying their services in two ways: either on new 4x8 panels along the walls, or at the smaller, waist-high podiums. Both allow travelers to make contact with Alaska's businesses and services.

Just like the old visitor center, the new center's backbone will be its staff of volunteers. This group of volunteers will work tirelessly throughout the summer telling visitors about the variety of things there is to see and do in the Copper Valley and neighboring communities.

The Chamber held a grand re-opening of the Copper Valley Visitor Center on May 3, 2014. People from the area helped celebrate the Chamber's newly remade building, and enjoyed a Fiddling Festival, Car Wash, and Hot Dog Feed. Over 250 hot dogs were eaten, and the Copper Valley hockey team washed 40 cars as Copper Valley residents enjoyed the new renovations and updated information on local businesses.

It's an exciting year for the Greater Copper Valley Chamber as it moves forward to work with surrounding communities at the new regional visitor center.

According to Jeremy Weld, Chamber President, "The



**Opposite top, an outside view of the newly remodeled Visitor Center
Opposite bottom, the old cabin Visitor Center
Top, Chamber President, Jeremy Weld, inside the remodeled Visitor Center
Above, the Copper Valley hockey team washing cars at the grand re-opening on May 3**

Photos courtesy Jeremy and Linda Weld

Chamber is 100 percent committed to making sure that the Copper Valley works with the communities around it -- especially Valdez -- to get travelers to where they can have an exciting adventure. The renovation of the visitor center, and the partnership from the City of Valdez to make it happen, is a commitment between the Copper Valley and Valdez to work together now and into the future. We hope that the newly refurbished visitor center is seen as a regional center, promoting the entire eastern side of the state."

By a happy coincidence, when travelers reach Valdez, they will be greeted by the staff of the Valdez Convention & Visitor Bureau, which has recently moved to a brand new visitor center in a rustic-themed building, at a new, central location.

If you're interested in volunteering at the Copper Valley Chamber or becoming a member or supporter, please visit www.coppervalleychamber.com, call (907) 822-5555, or stop by the Visitor Center at 188 Glenn Highway, in Glennallen. ■